

DISTRIBUTED PRACTICE: *thismeofmine.wordpress.com*

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This is an outline of several contexts and starting points for thinking about the This 'Me' of Mine exhibition blog and, by extension, the entire This 'Me' of Mine project. The blog, written and produced by the show's curator Jane Boyer, is an example of "distributed practice"ⁱ meaning creative work that engages with and catalyzes the formation of online networks that extend out from the physicality of the studio, gallery, and in-person relationships.

Borrowing from blogging convention—a form that I know by heart as a writer for the web—the following reflections on *thismeofmine.wordpress.com* are short, often personal, and fragmentary. They join current conversations, provoked by our networked condition, on time, context, discursive space, markets and commons, and the performative.

Time, Context

"[Myself] represents my person as I sit here writing this, my past which has brought me here where I sit and write, and the potential of what may happen next."ⁱⁱ

Jane Boyer

It is in the structural fabric of a blog to work between several different kinds of time at once; bloggers and their readers, self-consciously or not, follow suit. Of course, one of these types of time is linear, in which a blog is a spool of chronological data that—with a cursor scroll, a fingertip stroke, or a click on the 'older posts' button—one can easily rewind, skip, or fast-forward. The clock also spirals: blog posts organized into categories exhibit recurring themes that build upon each another, like getting multiple perspectives on the same landmark on a mountain walk full of hairpin bends. A blog contains wormholes too, where a click-through jumps a visitor eight hours, weeks, or years into the past, or bumps them back to the present. A bit like photographs, blog posts attempt to pin down moments in time—to 'keep' time and to capture life's episodes through writing, images, speech, and video.ⁱⁱⁱ Last in this incomplete list is shared time,^{iv} websites instantly connect people across time zones bloggers exchange stories and comments almost as if they occupied the same space.

The ease with which blogs exist within, and articulate, this temporal matrix makes blogging an ideal medium for telling stories about This 'Me' of Mine, an exhibition that explores our "multiplicity of selves, changed and influenced by time."^v

On January 30, 2012, in the very first This 'Me' of Mine post, Jane announced her move "from idea to intention"^{vi} and the project began its public life. Almost two years later, the blog functions, figuratively and literally, as a map of the exhibition's own 'self': its developmental journey, shifting presence, and potential. As such a marker of progress, the blog also performs as its author's proactive response to another of This 'Me' of Mine's key questions: "Can I impact my own context or am I forever bound [by it]?"^{vii}

Jane described her frustrations nine months later: "The hours spent writing proposals often ended in failed deliveries, delayed deliveries, deliveries made without a breath to spare, rejection after rejection and sometimes a deafening silence from the other end..."^{viii} Jane's commitment to maintaining *thismeofmine.wordpress.com*, for herself, the physical show's artists, and a network of participants, is a crucial part of an attempt to reach beyond limitations—this blog is both a record of action in time and an evolving statement of intent.

Necessary Discourse

"The project facilitated conversations and discussions between a variety of people who might not otherwise come into contact with each other."^x

Cotton and Klein

Words Without Pictures began 'life' in 2007 as an online discussion forum, *wordwithoutpictures.org*, and a series of talks that sought to create "spaces where thoughtful and urgent discourse around very current issues for photography could happen."^x In 2010, it became a book edited by artist Alex Klein and curator Charlotte Cotton.

In a similar vein, This 'Me' of Mine works across media platforms—the web, the gallery, organized and informal discussions, and now print—providing much-needed space for timely debate on time, self, and context; a combination of issues that deeply affect artistic and curatorial practice now.

Collective Attitude

"A structured community of creative minds outside the stresses of competing for limited resources in the art world."^{xi}

Catherine Pancake

"[W]hat is communal about the commons is run by an every-man-for-himself free market ideology and what is individual about personal branding is bolstered by a need for community."^{xii}

Brad Troemel

I have been a writer-member of two artist collectives. The first, Core Gallery, London, fortuitously introduced me to Jane Boyer, who worked there as a manager and curator; recently, members of Vox Populi, Philadelphia, helped me integrate into the city's tight-knit art community when I emigrated two years ago from the UK to the USA. Both groups—and many others like them—offer respite from what is frequently a harsh and unforgiving artistic environment in a difficult financial climate.

There are telling similarities between this collective milieu and *Artists Talking*, a-n.co.uk/artists_talking, the network of more than 700 artists' blogs that fostered some of the creative relationships that coalesced into This "Me" of Mine. Recently, Anthony Boswell, Jane Boyer^{xiii}, Annabel Dover, Hayley Harrison, David Minton, Kate Murdoch, and David Riley have all shared their practices in this space. Hosted by education and advocacy organization **a-n**, The Artists Information Company, *Artists Talking* is an online community that blends self-reflection and supportive conversation with opportunities for professional development.

In his article "Art After Social Media," 2012, Brad Troemel offers a critical perspective on web-based, artistic cooperative activity. He observes that when emerging artists competitively pursue online brand recognition, they not only cast themselves as modernist (or even Vasarian) self-sustaining, creative lone rangers, but also—ironically—they require support from the networked community in order to remain visible. Capitalism and commons, individual and collective, are entirely intertwined online; for Troemel, this mesh of opposites is simply the way things are.

Jane's This 'Me' of Mine blog has grown out of her three-year experience writing and exchanging art, life, and theory at *Artists Talking*. At thismeofmine.wordpress.com, Jane has created a similarly safe, open space in which she, the exhibition's artists, and their interlocutors can negotiate the contradictions of working separately and together, pursuing recognition and support. The blog features exhibitor interviews and a feature in which any artist can submit images and text that relate to the show's theme, as well as being open to comments. This 'Me' of Mine's online support of emerging artists does not, however, sidestep financial realities. The website features a bookshop, sponsors' logos, and a hi-res banner celebrating receipt of coveted Arts Council England funding. Professional development and an atmosphere of peer-to-peer support run in parallel on this site in a way that disrupts the free market ideology—and, indeed, the prevalent economic and cultural context—of personal branding at all costs.

On Conversation

"as we construct pictures of our lives online... our decisions about what 'counts' reflect not just what it takes to get our work done, but what we choose to include in the narratives we tell."^{xiv}

Tamarin Norwood

To readers of This 'Me' of Mine's blog, it is clear that Jane pays close attention to the people she meets and the things they say. These encounters range from an overheard conversation between mother and child in the supermarket, to lively debate during artist talks, one-on-one chats at private views, or "openings,"^{xv} and comments inscribed in gallery guest books. Jane tells thoughtful stories about such exchanges in ways that inform the exhibition's premise.

Some of the most revealing posts record conversations with gallery visitors, who disrupt polite appreciation with challenging questions and even drunken behaviour. Jane's critical discussion with Jeremy Wilson, about his disappointing experience of the show, resulted in the production of two powerful texts—one each by Jeremy and Jane—about the oft-dismissed role of audience in art presentation.^{xvi} Another interlocutor, the “Left-Handed Bricklayer,” arrived somewhat the worse for wear, but talked openly of his desire to make art and to move past the limitations of his own difficult context. In a post dated April 13, 2013, Jane noted: “I realised his being there was important, even if we did feel uncomfortable.”^{xvii}

For every pristine installation shot she uploads,^{xviii} Jane includes images of visitors in conversation, with each other and around the works, in the gallery.^{xix} Her choices correspond to one of the exhibition's core values: People count.

Between Ourselves

“[T]he artist, the spectator, and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here.”^{xx}

Allan Kaprow

In Allan Kaprow's 1958 *Art News* essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” the performance artist refers to a specific dilemma: when in front of Pollock's hefty, multi-layered drip paintings, we are torn between visions of the artist's “hands and body” flinging paint, standing “in” the canvas,^{xxi} provoked by Hans Namuth's iconic 1950s action shots of Pollock at work, and the tough, material tangle of pigment marks and ephemera that confronts us. It is impossible to separate the various public versions of “Pollock” in this encounter. As Amelia Jones famously put it, this “Pollockian performative” is a “site of contradictions... [a modernist artist-subject that is] fragmented, decentred, and intersubjectively defined.”^{xxii} Jones' identification of contradictions within the ‘king’ of modernist personae is surprisingly close to Brad Troemel's notes, mentioned earlier, on the postmodern conflict between the online individual and the collective.

This ‘Me’ of Mine originated in a comparable understanding of subjectivity as caught in the “fold” between interiority and the difficult necessity of acting in the external world, amongst other selves.^{xxiii} Inevitably, the This ‘Me’ of Mine blog participates and continues in these contradictions: individually authored blog posts are, like performances, “contingent on the act of reception.”^{xxiv} There is something special, however, about the relationship *thismeofmine.wordpress.com* continuously negotiates with these complex conditions. The blog reflects This ‘Me’ of Mine's grounding in modern and postmodern approaches to selfhood, and Jane's strong philosophical and art historical grasp of this conflicted territory. Interviews with the exhibition's artists reveal many examples of this sustained enquiry. In a conversation with artist, writer, and gallerist Cathy Lomax, Jane discusses the impact of social media on our individual and communal experiences of *Sehnsucht*, and in systems engineer David Riley's artist interview, they touch upon topics including the “facilities and limits” of a particular blogging platform's context; Riley's coding of online identities on Twitter; and the digital translation of “that existential triumvirate—memory, transience, and reason.”

Temporary Conclusion

“Can I impact my own context or am I forever bound by the vagaries of the fold?”

Jane Boyer

To loop back to the first entry in this collection of thoughts, what is most compelling about This ‘Me’ of Mine is that defiance towards ever present, ever binding context. Identifying neither as lonely modernist, nor disintegrated postmodernist, the exhibition and its multiple discursive spaces—including the blog—aim towards a new and useful attitude that acknowledges limitations while working to impact the conditions in which it intervenes.

ⁱ Drawing upon curator and web developer Kelani Nichole's catch-all term for so-called “Net” art communities, “distributed collectives” [http://library.littleberlin.org/treesaver/distributed_collectives/distributed_collectives.html]

ⁱⁱ Jane Boyer, “Premise Statement,” 2012 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/about>].

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- ^{iv} The project *Rhythms of Time Sharing*, KIOSK, 2010–11 [kioskcollective.org/projects/rhythms-of-time-sharing] is a fantastic example of performing shared time
- ^v Jane Boyer, “Premise Statement,” 13 February, 2012 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/about/>]
- ^{vi} Jane Boyer, “From Idea to Intention: This ‘Me’ of Mine,” January 30, 2012 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/from-idea-to-intention-this-me-of-mine/>]
- ^{vii} Jane Boyer, “Premise Statement,” 13 February, 2012 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/about/>]
- ^{viii} Jane Boyer, “Venues for This ‘Me’ of Mine Announced,” 16 October, 2012 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2012/10/16/venues-for-this-me-of-mine-announced/>]
- ^{ix} Charlotte Cotton and Alex Klein, *Words Without Pictures*, p. 1, 2010, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art
- ^x *Ibid*
- ^{xi} Catherine Pancake, Vox Populi member, comment about collective membership left on Vox Populi Google Groups forum, 24/3/2013
- ^{xii} Brad Troemel, “Art After Social Media *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory*, p. 5, (ny-magazine.org, 2012)
- ^{xiii} Jane Boyer’s Artists Talking blogs (2010–11) are archived at: http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/643588 and http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/1800787
- ^{xiv} Tamarin Norwood, 2011
- ^{xv} Jane Boyer, “An important thing happened last night or the left-handed bricklayer,” April 13, 2013 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2013/04/13/an-important-thing-happened-last-night-or-the-left-handed-bricklayer/>]
- ^{xvi} Jane Boyer, “Do we miss the mark by expecting too much from art?,” April 16, 2013 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/do-we-miss-the-mark-by-expecting-too-much-from-art/>]
- ^{xvii} Jane Boyer, April 13, 2013
- ^{xviii} See an image of the gleaming, empty APT gallery space in the post “We’re off to Folkestone,” April 5, 2013 [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/were-off-to-folkestone/>]
- ^{xix} The image that accompanies the May 20, 2013 post “This ‘Me’ of Mine is open in Sevenoaks” is a great example [<http://thismeofmine.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/this-me-of-mine-is-open-in-sevenoaks/>]
- ^{xx} Alan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock *Art News*, 1958; quoted in Amelia Jones, “The Pollockian Performative and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” in *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 1998, p. 57
- ^{xxi} Kaprow, quoted in Amelia Jones, 1998, pp. 56–57
- ^{xxii} Amelia Jones, 1998, pp. 56–58
- ^{xxiii} Jane Boyer, Premise Statement, 2012
- ^{xxiv} Amelia Jones, 1998